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HD **Americans Haven't Elected a President Younger Than 43. Does 38-Year-Old Vivek Ramaswamy Stand a Chance? Former biotech entrepreneur faces scrutiny over lack of experience: 'It makes people question whether you should be in charge of the nuclear codes'**
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LACONIA, N.H.—The 38-year-old Republican presidential hopeful Vivek Ramaswamy stood on stage at a recent campaign event here and read the audience a text message that he said came from a billionaire GOP mega donor.

"Your youth and lack of experience will become an even bigger issue when you get foreign policy wrong," the donor told Ramaswamy, according to the candidate's retelling. "It makes people question whether you should be in charge of the nuclear codes."

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Ramaswamy is among the youngest candidates ever to run for president, and he's doing it in an election where both parties' leading contenders would be the [oldest nominees in U.S. history](#). The distinction has both helped him stand out in a crowded GOP field and emerged as a liability at a time when voters and Republican party leaders [are giving his candidacy more scrutiny](#).

The critique of inexperience is familiar to the long list of young contenders who have challenged establishment orthodoxy in recent presidential elections. Pete Buttigieg was 37 when he briefly shined as the Democratic candidate whose political resume stopped at mayor of tiny South Bend, Ind. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, each 45 years old when they announced their presidential bids, were dismissed at various moments as too young and inexperienced.

No one under 43 has ever been elected U.S. president, with John F. Kennedy being the youngest to win office. Youthful contenders who fall short sometimes get to the White House years later. Joe Biden was 44 years old the first time he ran for president. He competed in a field that included a 39-year-old Al Gore, who went on to become Clinton's vice president at age 44.

[Ramaswamy has climbed to fourth place](#) in a recent Wall Street Journal poll with 5% of GOP voters saying they want him to be president. He's the second choice of 16% of GOP voters, with just one candidate, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, 44, ahead of him in that category, the

survey shows. His staff was adding chairs to his events in New Hampshire on a recent weekend, as voters crowded in to see him.

The [former biotech entrepreneur](#) is the only major candidate in the GOP field who has never held elected office. He was one of just two on the debate stage to have never held the title governor, and GOP rival Nikki Haley, 51, seized on his thin resume when she said: "You have no foreign policy experience, and it shows."

He points to a series of policy debacles overseen by the last decades' crop of leaders—including the 2008 financial crisis and inaccurate claims by the Bush administration that Iraq had an active program to make [weapons of mass destruction](#)—as evidence that time spent governing isn't always an asset.

"We grew up into a generation where we have a government that has systematically lied to us," Ramaswamy said in a recent town hall in Conway, N.H. "Part of my job as the young person in this race is to make values like faith and family and patriotism and hard work cool again, actually, for young Americans."

Being decades younger can help a candidate connect with millennial voters in no small measure because they still recall the frustrations and experiences of balancing early phase careers, life and finances, said Andrew Yang, who announced his 2020 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination at 42 years old.

"Younger candidates often can speak directly to what a lot of other Americans are actually thinking and experiencing," Yang said in an interview. "It's a little bit harder as you get older and are a little bit more removed from that 'figuring it out' stage of your own life."

Although Yang didn't make it to the White House, his campaign pitch for a universal basic income laid the groundwork for federal Covid-pandemic relief payments to Americans in 2020. Yang recalled that Donald Trump's team reached out to him as his administration crafted the initial response to the health emergency, which included direct financial aid.



Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy eats a slice of pizza as his family and campaign aides leave the Lancaster Fair in Lancaster, N.H. PHOTO: Elizabeth Frantz for The Wall Street Journal

Republican operatives see in Ramaswamy's candidacy an attempt to weld 77-year-old Trump's movement to a new generation. Ramaswamy has called Trump the best president of the 21st century and directs his attacks to other candidates in the race. His main opponents have vacillated between silence and veiled jabs at the leading GOP presidential contender.

"The irony is that Vivek, of anyone on that stage, is doing the most effective job of taking votes from Trump by hugging him most closely but also being a younger generation of the Trump ethos," said Chris Hartline, a longtime Republican strategist.

Ramaswamy has staked out positions that differentiate him from most of the GOP field and describes his political philosophy as "strongly American nationalist." He would pardon Trump, while other leading candidates have hedged their responses on that question. He opposes what he calls "the climate cult" as other leading GOP candidates acknowledge the planet's warming, even if they oppose policies aimed at preventing it.

He wants to cut 75% of the federal workforce, while others vaguely say it is too big. And when asked during the debate who would stop sending military aid to Ukraine, Ramaswamy was the only one to raise his hand without caveats. The donor whose text he read on stage here was pressuring Ramaswamy to shift his Ukraine stance, which he said he has no plans to do. He declined to name the donor.

During his recent campaign stops here, younger voters snapped photos with Ramaswamy and stood up to ask him questions about his position and even for life advice.



James Thibault, 17, second from the right, says Vivek Ramaswamy 'energizes a lot of voters because of his age.' PHOTO: Elizabeth Frantz for The Wall Street Journal



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James Thibault, 17 of Franklin, N.H., said Ramaswamy "energizes a lot of voters because of his age."

He added that "the Biden factor," which he defined as watching an 80-year-old candidate, fails to inject enthusiasm. "I liked DeSantis early in his campaign but he's not getting the young people out. And I think that's incredibly important," said Thibault.

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How much does a candidate's age factor into your view of them? Join the conversation below.

Ramaswamy knows firsthand how voters can judge lack of experience. In October 2003, an 18-year-old Ramaswamy attended an MSNBC town hall and asked then-presidential contender Rev. Al Sharpton a question: "Of all the Democratic candidates out there, why should I vote for the one with the least political experience?"

Sharpton shot back that Ramaswamy shouldn't confuse political experience with a job in politics, given he had been involved with political movements from a young age.

Sharpton, now an MSNBC host, recently had Ramaswamy on his show and posed the same question, asking why anyone should vote for him given his lack of time in office.

"You persuaded me on that," Ramaswamy said. "That political experience is not the same as holding office."

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